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Academic franchising: some pointers for improving practice

Deborah Goodall

The development of franchising

Academic franchising saw a rapid and widespread growth in the late 1980s to early 1990s and has provided opportunities for many thousands of students who would otherwise have been excluded from higher education. Yet, despite the continued and growing presence of franchised courses in the education system, the approach has been, as far as possible, to make them fit in or run alongside traditional courses. At a time when even university libraries are finding difficulties supporting their students with the rapid development of student-centred learning in higher education, it is not surprising to find that the franchise situation, where students have to rely on much smaller libraries stocked for lower level courses, is causing concern. It is incumbent on the colleges and universities involved to ensure that franchised students receive an appropriate experience at both institutions. But what sort of experience is appropriate? While statistics indicate the size of the operation there has been little research which gives a feel for development of franchised provision in the UK and the personal experiences of those students involved. While it is recognized that library and information services are a key element in higher education courses, encouraging the development of independent study and information handling skills, and thereby delivering a vital part of the higher education experience, the piecemeal and essentially local nature of many early franchising developments has meant that strategic areas such as library provision were not systematically or nationally addressed. Instead development has depended on the level of commitment between the franchiser and franchisee to work in partnership.

Library support for franchised courses in colleges and universities

The impact of this haphazard approach on library provision for franchised courses became readily apparent when the results of two surveys of college and university librarians, examining their involvement with support for franchised courses, were compared[1]. In essence, the findings described a patchwork of provision. The main practical problems in extending the college library service to cater for higher education students stemmed from difficulties with funding. Typically funds were available for start-up costs but not for recurrent

expenditure. Funding had an impact on stock as librarians found that higher education texts were expensive compared to further education texts and consequently it was difficult to provide multiple copies. Journals were also expensive to provide and were not always well used because of a lack of interest by teaching staff and a lack of indexing and abstracting services in the college libraries. There were also wider issues of concern such as the study environment in the library, the difficulties of catering for the differing demands of franchised students in a college context and of preparing them to move on to a larger and more complex university library, and the struggle to procure professional staff and time to develop information skills work. A recurring issue was the extent to which the library was involved in the franchising process by college management. Librarians claimed to be eager to contribute their professional expertise but were often being bypassed. The problems most readily identified by the college librarians tended to be practical issues, while the benefits were perceived to be more of a managerial or professional nature. The most pressing issues, however, were to do with improving relationships and communications structures with teaching staff and management within the college. This situation is indicative of the differences in culture between further and higher education.

As far as university librarians were concerned, issues deriving from problems with library provision in franchised colleges were not particularly notable, other than local difficulties with borrowing rights. A striking finding in the survey of higher education librarians was that provision for franchised courses had not significantly changed the way in which the university library was organized, nor the range and style of services. The university librarians complained of a lack of understanding by their own senior management about the impact of higher education courses both in the college and university libraries, but yet, compared to college librarians, few appeared to be actively trying to improve the situation by raising their own profile.

The student experience

It is within this uneasy scenario then that we assess the student experience of library provision for franchised courses. What many library managers fail to acknowledge is that there are over-arching problems for higher education

students studying on franchised courses in further education colleges, arising simply from the type of student that is attracted to a franchised course. The traditional view of a student is someone aged between 18 and 21, studying full time and living away from home and on/near the campus. Usually because of their recent A-level experiences such students are familiar with the need to use libraries, with providing regular, written coursework and so on. In particular they are supported by a library administration geared up to this pattern (e.g. library opening hours, loan periods, etc.) Often students following franchised courses do not fit this pattern. Many have non-traditional qualifications such as BTEC diplomas or were recruited by being offered accreditation of prior learning to validate prior work experience. Many have responsibilities and commitments beyond the day-to-day academic demands of their course. Many study on a part-time basis to accommodate employment and domestic demands which fit less well with the patterns of life catered for in higher education.

How such students studying on franchise courses meet their library and information needs, and what might improve the nature and level of library support, were two of the issues examined as part of the Library Support for Franchised Courses in Higher Education project carried out by the Centre for Research in Library and Information Management at the University of Central Lancashire for the British Library Research and Development Department between 1993-95. Library support was examined from four perspectives, that of the students, their tutors, and the librarians in both colleges and universities. These experiences are reported elsewhere[2-4]; the remainder of this article draws from the reports of the actual experience of students[5] studying on franchised courses in relation to the provision and availability of library resources, and spells out the practical implications of this research for university and college library managers.

Weaknesses in provision and coping strategies

As far as the franchised students were concerned the actual weaknesses in college library provision were to do with stock, essentially that there were not enough copies of up-to-date books. Another major problem for franchised students centred on the study environment, in that there was no space and/or that it was too

noisy to work in the library. The students also had difficulties with loan periods for library materials, for example, short loan was for too short a period or too many books were available for reference only. The main coping strategy at the college sites was, first, to share books, and this was generally facilitated by the smaller course groups. Second, students would also buy books, but this occurred to a much lesser degree. A third strategy was to rely on lecture notes or borrowing from tutors and photocopying. Other strategies included doing without, improvising, and using the university or public library.

The main problem at the university sites also centred on stock, that books were out of date for the assignments and that there were not enough copies for the number of students. Two other issues for the university students were that books did not appear to be shelved quickly or correctly in the university libraries and that it was awkward to approach staff. The main coping strategies at the universities were, first, but not as overwhelmingly as at the colleges, to share material. The next options were to look for alternative titles or to buy books.

It is interesting that both university and college students, on the whole, experienced the same types of problems with library and information provision. There are difficulties in assessing what the views of students mean. It is debatable how much of the "not enough books" problem is an actual one, rather than a perceived one. It could stem from the actions, or rather the inaction, of the student: for example, in using inadequate search strategies, or in not using the catalogue or exploring alternative terms, or in not finding things because of where they were shelved. For example, at the time of the study, none of the college libraries had computerized catalogues. Although these students had access to card catalogues they found them time-consuming to use and preferred to browse along the shelves. At best, therefore, they were selecting from what was still left on shelf; at worst, they were not finding anything useful because they were not looking on the right shelves in the library.

One of the findings from the survey of college and university librarians mentioned earlier was that further education libraries tended to be encouraged to provide a comparable student experience by duplicating services available in the university library. Such duplication did not always prove to be appropriate in practice. For example, a short loan collection was a standard

facility in the university libraries and had usually been introduced at the college to cater for the needs of the higher education students. However the problem with using short loan for the franchised students, many of whom lived some distance from the college, was that the loan period was too short if they were working at home; so students resorted to using the books in the library or photocopying sections of the books. Similarly in the university libraries it was expected that students would exploit the journal collection to complement the bookstock, and some did, although all students lacked confidence in using the journals. At the colleges, however, there were extra difficulties arising from the narrow range of the journals, and the fact that they were not for loan and that they were not always indexed. Furthermore, some colleges simply could not afford to buy journals.

Assumptions about library use

The study revealed many instances of students not using what was provided in the way that library managers would expect them to, and this must surely make us question some of the assumptions we hold about students and library use. Students find it hard doing research for assignments; they are looking for whole chapters of information, not just snippets, and their approaches to books and their expectations about reading are often very different from those of their tutors. These issues are common to all students and are not necessarily franchise issues. The students' problems with the range of stock then could be due to problems with assignment setting by tutors. Whether this is true or not, one thing is clear, that students' use of libraries is very, if not wholly, assignment driven, in their first year. However, despite difficulties in tackling assignments and using libraries, students rarely, if ever, consulted library staff with subject enquiries. While the university students complained that it was hard to find staff and that they sometimes felt intimidated by them, the college students were much less likely to have access to the skills of subject staff. Those that attended the college in the evening might not even receive the services of a professional librarian. However, this is also an area where students studying at a small college can be advantaged compared with students studying at the much larger university. For all of their complaints about college libraries it was evident that the students knew the staff in the

library. Because the libraries were smaller they tended to be friendlier and more flexible: there were examples of rules being broken so that students could borrow reference material over the weekend when the college library was closed and so on.

As far as franchised students are concerned there are two key points to remember. Although their generic problems with library and information services may be much the same as those experienced by university students, the students themselves are different and the environment in which they are studying is different. What attracts students to such courses is that a higher education programme is delivered locally in a geographically convenient location and often in an already familiar environment. When they hear about the overcrowding and anonymity in universities some franchised students are more than willing to trade, say, poor library facilities and the absence of a Student Union in exchange for the advantages of close contact with tutors and the smallness of student groups in colleges. There are in fact strengths and weaknesses on both sides and it is dangerous to assume that what franchised students need in the college is a reproduction of the higher education experience.

Second, franchised students can be genuinely short of time when they use library and information services. For example, the timetable for a part-time evening course is invariably fully occupied with classes and there will be little time to discuss topics with other students and staff other than in class, so there may be a greater need than usual to use the library. However, such students, particularly if they are working or have other commitments, will be under a lot of pressure simply getting to and from the classes. Consider too, for a moment, the strategy of sharing books which both university and college students relied on. There is a very big difference between, on the one hand, swapping a selection of books with a colleague who lives in the next room in the Hall of Residence and, on the other, sharing a single copy of a recommended book between a seminar group or arranging to exchange a title at the weekly meeting of the class. Some groups of college students were working primarily from home. In some cases this was, as found with university students, due to personal preference. However, many franchised students had little choice in choosing where to work because of the incompatibility of their lifestyle and library opening hours or because of the lack of facilities

in the college for extended study. This can have an impact not only on how these students use the library at the college but also on how they go on to use the library at the university.

Suggestions for improving practice: from the point of view of the student

It is always easy to identify the problems in any situation, but harder to offer workable solutions. In the case of franchising particularly there is a need for both groups of staff, academic and library, in the colleges and the universities, to accept mutual responsibility for the students. Franchised students see themselves as being a different type of student, both in the college and when they arrive at the university. Neither the tutors nor the librarians at the college and university have a very good feel for the overall learning experience for franchised students, so there is a need to build up closer links between these four groups. So what steps can be taken to develop better practice?

From the point of view of the student there is a need for closer links between the college and the university. The advantages that students have within the franchised situation, such as the closeness to tutors and the benefits of studying within a small organization, need to be recognized. Even if the resources are not adequate in the college library the students do get help in exploiting what is available. When they arrive at the university they may find that the resources are still not adequate but there is even less personal support. There is a need for colleges to warn students that it will be different at the university. There is a need for universities to recognize that franchise students are joining a second-year cohort who have already managed to map out and come to terms with the culture of the institution. Closer links between the college and the university can encourage the franchised students, while they are still at the college, to use the university library, and this will ease progression. This can be achieved by mentoring schemes where students who have moved on to the university go back to the college to share experiences, or by facilitating a peer support system at the university.

Franchised students need practical help to make best use of available academic libraries. Sometimes students fall into a gap regarding what services they are entitled to use and what is convenient for them to use. For example, until they actually come into the university they may not get full rights at the university library.

However students may still find it convenient to use the college library even when they have progressed to the university, because of their geographical location. Consequently some students will enrol on, say, non-academic courses to ensure college library access. The students may not perceive the gap between the college and the university in the same way that the two institutions do. If college students are to be able to use the university library, while still at the college, or the college library after they have moved on to the university, they need practical help, such as being able to return library books belonging to the university via the college and vice versa. If the university is wholeheartedly to encourage library use by college students, then there needs to be a clear statement on the library support available to college students: for example, by providing publicity materials and/or an information pack for college students stating the services available, opening hours, location, etc.; the facility to book appointments with subject librarians and equipment for students who are making a special journey to use the library; good signing and guides so that it is easy for irregular users to find their way around the library; training for all staff about the level of provision available to college students supported by clear documentation and guidelines. Having said that, it is not enough simply to send out publicity material. University library staff must meet with the students and library staff in the colleges. The university needs to take the initiative and explain what the library will do and what it cannot do, and to give the students and the college librarian the opportunity to ask and negotiate for what they require.

Suggestions for improving practice in the college

In the colleges franchising has brought about increases in funding, staffing and status and college librarians must take responsibility for using status. They need to be able to assess the demands of higher education students on the college library in order to gain adequate funds for resourcing. This is essential. The main value of the college library lies in the services which it can supply immediately, rather than in back-up service to which it can give access. It is not acceptable for students to rely on public libraries or the local university; provision must be adequate where they are studying.

Librarians need to make efforts to inform themselves about franchising activities in the college, by collecting college strategy documents, minutes of course committee meetings, etc. There appears to be a lack of input into the franchising process by college librarians and yet they can often speak more knowledgeably and authoritatively about the needs and experiences of their students than university librarians. For example, if a college franchises from several universities then the college librarian will have valuable experience of what is provided by different institutions and this can be a useful bargaining point in gaining resources and access to services at validation. College librarians often complain about being isolated in the college setting, in which case it is essential that they draw support from their professional associations and other franchise partners. Similarly principles of good practice and guidelines do exist but they are not always implemented. They need to be taken up and owned by the groups involved; for example, through professional groups such as CoFHE.

Apart from basic orientation to the library lecturers and students might not perceive that further skills are involved in locating and utilizing the information available in the library. Students soon plug into the minimum expectations and requirements of an institution and adopt their own strategies regardless of what tutors might say. Some find that they can succeed as a student without using the library efficiently or effectively or even at all. There is, however, a difference in study style between further and higher education, and college librarians need to prepare students for this difference, not least in equipping them with the confidence and skills to deal with a much larger library with a much lower level of individual support. Since it is lecturing staff who decide on subject content, if college librarians wish to strengthen the role of the library they need to be more assertive by forming a partnership between themselves and the lecturers. In order to do this they need to have an understanding of the lecturers, their attitudes, their learning methods and how they view the importance of library skills. There is a need to encourage tutors to come into the library to examine and weed stock, to find out what is new, to discuss what will be taught, and to explore collaboratively the student experience. The likelihood of achieving these can be increased by the college librarian becoming a member of course teams, by spending time in departments with academic staff, and being

seen as an academic colleague rather than the librarian. Additionally librarians need to understand that tutors might feel threatened by the increase in technology in many libraries; there may be a need to offer training sessions, for example, for the CD-ROM, or to demonstrate the library's approachability and relevance to their subject area with current awareness activities.

Suggestions for improving practice in the university

There is a need to know what students use in the university and how this compares with what tutors are recommending students to read by way of reading lists. There are difficulties in both sectors in defining what constitutes "basic" provision for the first year of a higher education course. How many books and journals per student? Which books? Which journals? What does a first-year student actually use? If we could answer these questions this could offer a guide to provision. For example, do first year university students actually use journals? Is there a need for colleges physically to stock the journals or would they make better use of funds by subscribing to indexes and abstracting services and using interlibrary loans? Tutors want students to absorb the information contained within a journal article; librarians want students to be able to retrieve the journal article. Both of these activities can be time-consuming. To what extent does the emphasis placed on the latter detract from the achievement of the former?

There is a need to recognize that franchised students are a different type of student when they arrive at the university and that the level of support and the type of support provided in the college library are very different in nature from what is provided in the university library. They will have general needs like any other student, but also specific needs, perhaps familiarization with electronic services which were not available at the college. Obviously university librarians need to be familiar with provision in college libraries. A scheme of planned and co-ordinated collaborative information skills work could be developed. For example, open days where both college and university library staff could be involved with information skills activities at the university would at least give some continuity of contact for the students. Failing this it would be beneficial to introduce the provision for realignment at the start of the second year,

as opposed to simple induction, for new second-year students.

As in the colleges, the library must take an active role in the university. There may be a need to examine the staff structure. It can be difficult to offer new services through an old structure. It may be necessary for university library staff to spend time out in the colleges working with college librarians and college students, and it can be politically useful to have a designated franchised colleges librarian so that such work, which may be very time-consuming with no visible return for university students, is not lost in the general work of the university library. There may be a demand for telephone, postal and electronic links between the university and its off-campus sites to enable communication, access to on-line search services, and the electronic delivery of documents. The high profile nature of such services also demonstrates the university's commitment to such students. Finally there is a general need to improve communication. This could include work-shadowing and staff exchanges as well as annual meetings. Ideally the relationship is not between a college and a university but between a network of institutions working together to develop best practice.

Note and references

- 1 Goodall, D., "Franchising courses, library resources: the view from both sides", *Library & Information Research News*, Vol. 18 No. 61, 1994, pp. 22-8.
- 2 Goodall, D., "The impact of franchised HE courses on library and information services in FE colleges", *Journal of Further & Higher Education*, Vol. 19 No. 3, 1995.
- 3 Goodall, D., "Just in time, just in case, or just do without: the student experience of library and information services for franchised courses", *CoFHE Bulletin*, No. 76, 1995, pp. 2-7.
- 4 Goodall, D., "Franchised courses: the university library perspective", *Education Libraries Journal*, Vol. 37 No. 3, 1994, pp. 5-20.
- 5 A sample of 45 college students together with a control sample of 46 university students from a range of five subject disciplines was selected. Participating students kept diaries to record their everyday experiences of using libraries as they completed pieces of assessed work and were engaged in follow-up focus group discussions with the researcher. This work is described fully in the forthcoming British Library report, provisionally entitled *A Comparable Experience? Library Support for Franchised Courses in Higher Education*. Please contact CERLIM at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston PR1 2HE, for more details.